

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, VSBA  
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary of Education  
SUBJECT: SBAC Test  
DATE: February 17, 2015

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It has been brought to my attention that some school leaders in Vermont are contemplating an "opt out" of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium ("SBAC") test at the local level. I know that for some of you, there is frustration around the timeline and the work involved with the initial administration of the SBAC. While this frustration is understandable, I want to be very clear that if we (AOE, school administrators and school board members) in Vermont do not maintain fidelity to federal requirements, we/you will forfeit federal funds.

As federal fund recipients, at both the state and local level, we must be clear that schools, districts or systems that do not administer the test will not be eligible for *any* federal funding, without exception. This includes federal programs such as IDEA, Title I, Title II, and federal support for Child Nutrition. Most of these resources provide additional support for children in poverty or children with disabilities. In addition, schools or districts which are not eligible for federal funding will lose access to federally supported work from AOE, including support related to implementation of EQS and local efforts which align to federal projects. Systems which lose access to federal funding will need to either cut services to students or raise the local tax rate - both of which have seriously negative implications for the students and communities we all serve.

I understand that many of you object to the punitive use of these tests under NCLB. I share these objections. Like many of you, I do not support sanctions that discourage our best teachers from serving those students who need them most: students with disabilities and students living in poverty. Like many of you, I worry that too much emphasis on test-based accountability creates a new kind of equity gap, as schools -- and particularly high poverty schools-- feel compelled to narrow curriculum to what is tested, and away from other critical learning children need to thrive as adults in civic and economic life. Given that the "proficiency threshold" on the new tests is set so high that two-thirds of our high school students will likely not score as "proficient," it is a virtual certainty that once again, all our public schools will be labeled "low performing," despite the fact that a study by the US Department of Education ranked us seventh in the world in math and science. This is also despite the fact that our students

know more, on average, than children in their parents' generation, judging by scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. As one legislator recently told me after reviewing a sample SBAC test online, "I am really glad I am not in school today, because I don't think I would do very well."

In addition, [Vermont does not support reporting in terms of performance thresholds](#) because their use distorts the true story of schools' efforts to improve learning. Performance thresholds are arbitrarily set and mask the growth students make from year to year. If every single student in a school does not score above a subjective proficiency threshold, regardless of how much growth he or she made over the past year, the school is labeled "low performing." Although publicly funded students in our historical academies score the same, on average, as students in our public schools, the federal government does not require them to wear this "scarlet letter" of shame. I understand why you would want to be exempt from this shaming.

I also worry about the impact on our children of repeatedly focusing on the label "not proficient" rather than focusing on the growth they made during the year. The researcher Carol Dweck tells us that focusing on growth and marking progress and effort increases the willingness of students to take risks and persevere with hard tasks. In contrast, Dweck tells us that focusing on performance and failure can lead to discouragement, and unwillingness to try challenging tasks and disengagement. Let's focus on helping our students stretch and grow, rather than focusing on telling them they don't meet an arbitrary cut score.

However, I ask you to not let [the inappropriate uses to which tests are put under NCLB undermine what value there is in tests, when used appropriately](#). Unlike previous tests, this is a computer adaptive test which adjusts the difficulty of questions in response to the answers students provide. This allows for more accurate information about what each child can and cannot yet do; this information will help teachers to better respond to their students' needs. Without tests, we would not know for example, that one of our highest priorities as a state needs to be improving the learning of our boys who are growing up in poverty. We would not know that while the performance of our most affluent students outstrips the nation and is improving every year, we have foundered in our efforts to improve the learning of students with disabilities. Let's work together to use these tests to improve, not shame, our schools and systems. We know we have work to do to improve, and used wisely, tests can be one of a series of tools that help us target our efforts.

Along with the proper administration of the SBAC, we are also asking you to work with us proactively, to help the public understand what the SBAC test does and does not measure. Most importantly, we need to push back with Vermont's voice, and explain the appropriate and inappropriate inferences to be drawn from student scores on standardized tests, as well as our firm conviction that the purpose of our schools is not to educate our students to do well on tests, but to educate them to thrive in life. If we do

the latter, I am confident we will also see steady, incremental and real learning gains that will also be measured by the tests students take.

In a few weeks, we hope to send out the recently completed white paper, written by members of SBAC's technical advisory committee, which speaks to appropriate and inappropriate uses of test scores. We hope this, along with a letter from my office, will help support your messaging around SBAC.

On a lighter note, we are inviting a few legislators and journalists to take the SBAC test with our high school students this spring, so they can speak for us and for our students about what this test demands. We expect our 10th graders will give our legislators and journalists a run for their money!

Thank you for your continued efforts on behalf of Vermont's students. I value and appreciate all your efforts to support our educators and keep the focus of our schools on improving learning, especially given the challenging policy context in which we are all operating. I know none of you entered this job because it was easy; you do this work because you know there is nothing more important to the health of our community.

Please contact my office if there is anything we can do to assist you during this period of transition to the SBAC test.